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ABSTRACT

The failure of journalism historians to address important philosophical and methodological issues has led to a loss of vitality in historical research and teaching. As far back as the early 1950s, this situation attracted considerable concern, but it was not until the late 1960s that complaints were transformed into critical historiographical reflection. A review of articles that have offered critical reflections on journalism historiography indicates that only a handful of journalism historians have given serious consideration to the origins of the problems in their field; that, of those, most have failed to penetrate to the heart of the philosophical and methodological assumptions from which the difficulties have spread; and that, with only a few exceptions, journalism historians have not utilized or developed viable alternative perspectives. To ensure the survival and growth of the field of journalism historiography, serious ongoing reflection should be given to three main problem areas: the journalism historian's field of investigation, the making of historical judgments, and the task of historical revision. (GW)

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NEW DIRECTIONS FOR JOURNALISM HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Critical reflection on the dimensions and directions of journalism historiography is not prevalent among practicing journalism historians. The pervasive influence of the Progressive tradition has encouraged few journalism historians to reexamine the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of their work.[1] There has been only a handful of convention papers and published essays which have addressed these issues, though the number has increased in the last few years.[2] Yet, on the whole, practicing journalism historians have not been a very self-reflective lot.

This paper will review what little critical reflection has been done by journalism historians and point out some prerequisites for a reformation of journalism historiography. The thrust of the argument developed here is that the plight of journalism historiography is due in part to the absence of a critical self-consciousness and that if the field is to gain any degree of philosophical or methodological sophistication then there must be an ongoing reexamination of the field of investigation, a review of the problem of historical judgment, and a striving for historical revision.

The failure of journalism historians to address important philosophical and methodological issues permitted the entrenchment of a single perspective which consequently stifled the field. As far back as the early fifties, this loss of vitality in historical research and teaching attracted considerable concern. Theodore Peterson suggested that if the journalism history course, that "shabby little orphan" in the curriculum, was to remain nothing more than a dull chronological story of the press as seen in a vacuum, then "perhaps it had best be put to death, quietly, mercifully."[3] Even Allan Nevins, himself rooted in the Progressive

tradition, wondered, "Why . . . do we have so little good history that the number of volumes which can be termed excellent can be counted on the fingers of two hands?"[4] In an effort to provide a forum for philosophical and methodological discussion and "to stimulate teaching and research in the history of journalism," the small newsletter Coranto was initiated by Fred S. Siebert and Theodore Peterson at Illinois. However, this early attempt to confront historiographical problems fell victim to its own editor's suggestion for the history course and died quietly after a few issues.[5]

Though complaints about the quality of historical research in journalism continued throughout the sixties, there was still very little attention given to the philosophical and methodological problems involved in that research. It was not until the late sixties that complaints were transformed into critical historiographical reflection. John D. Stevens and Donald L. Shaw surveyed journalism history teachers and concluded that they were "beginning to see the history of journalism as a piece of a very much broader story--the history of communication."[6] Stevens and Shaw also sought to discover historical research priorities among teachers, but they did so only within the narrow limits of the traditional historical periods and topics. At the June 1969 meeting of the AEJ Convention, Donald E. Oehlerts presented a paper entitled, "The Influence of Interpretations of American History on the History of the Press." This was the first important attempt to analyze the major works of Mott, Emery and others and to delineate their basic assumptions and underlying presuppositions. To his amazement, Oehlerts "was unable to find any evidence that journalism historians have evaluated or used any of the significant books in American history that have been published in

the past fifteen to twenty years."[7] He was able to find references to the works of the Beards, the Schlesingers, Fredrick Jackson Turner, Vernon Parrington and other Progressive historians, but in the end he had to admit, "If historians of the press have been reading the current historical literature and incorporating it into their writing I have missed it completely."[8] Unfortunately, Oehlert's brief essay was never published.

Ronald T. Farrar's essay, "Mass Communications History: A Myriad of Approaches," greeted the seventies with a penetrating piece of critical historiographical reflection.[9] Farrar outlined a very brief history of journalism historiography, noted some of its successes and failures, and attempted to offer some new directions for future research. He lamented the fact that journalism and mass communications studies were divided between weak historical research and a very strong behavioral contingent "with consuming interests in quantification."[10] Nevertheless, Farrar was optimistic that the field was taking on a "new identity, a new sense of purpose, a new self-confidence, and a willingness to break new ground." But his optimism was short-lived. The following year, in an article appearing in Journalism Educator, Farrar had become alarmed at the "performance" of journalism historians. He located the root of the problems not in philosophical or methodological issues, but rather in teaching technique and the inner spirit.

> Something made us journalists and historians instead of real estate salesmen or stockbrokers or taxicab drivers. Whenever we rediscover what that something was, and is, then our problems inside and outside the classroom will take care of themselves.[11]

And though he claimed that "our subject matter itself needs no defence,"

and that he was not worried about philosophy, still he clung to the philosophical position that "journalism history must not be dehumanized."[12]

Hanno Hardt's essay, "Communication and History: The Dimensions of Man's Reality," developed the philosophical and methodological implications of man as the maker of messages and history--issues which Farrar chose not to address.[13] Hardt attempted to outline the groundwork for full-blown humanistic theories of history and communication. In constructing his outline, Hardt explored the interrelationships between communications and history, between history and the nature of man, and discussed the processes of historical selection and the character of historical assumptions. Though his concerns were deliberately broader than journalism history per se, Hardt nonetheless provided a rare philosophical reflection into the nature and character of the journalism historian's task.

James W. Carey provided some thought-provoking and stimulating suggestions with his paper entitled, "What's Wrong with Teaching and Research in Journalism History?" In this address before the 1973 AEJ Convention, Carey summarized the major complaints against journalism historiography, but his main purpose was to press beyond that stage and to offer some new perspectives on old problems. First, he identified the basic root of the problem in the fact that the field "has been dominated by one implicit paradigm of interpretation--an interpretation I will call for what I hope are obvious reasons a whig interpretation of journalism history."[14] Secondly, he argued that this perspective with its numerous legal histories of the press, institutional histories, technological histories, economic histories and biographies had reached a dead-end.

> The problem with this interpretation, and the endless studies and biographies executed within its frame, is simply that it is exhausted; it has done its intellectual work. One more history written against the background of the whig interpretation would not be wrong--just redundant.[15]

And thirdly, Carey proposed that journalism historians turn their energies toward paradigmatic reformulations wherein the idea of the report might find its place. The study of journalism history, according to Carey, was principally the study of the way men in the past grasped reality, that is, the study of the history of consciousness as expressed in the journalistic report.

But it was Carey's proposal for a cultural history of journalism that generated the most enthusiasm. After a revised and edited version of his paper appeared in the first issue of Journalism History, a number of essays appeared which interacted with his cultural suggestions. Garth S. Jowett, John Erickson, Thomas Heuterman, Marion Marzolf, Richard Schwarzlose, Donald Shaw, and David H. Weaver each contributed articles which touched on the problems and proposals outlined by Carey.[16] What is interesting to note, however, is that almost all of these authors limited their attention to what Marzolf called, "operationalizing Carey." Basically, they passed by the fundamental philosophical criticisms which Carey had outlined, and they focussed their concerns on the application of Carey's cultural approach to research data instead. At least as far as Marzolf and Schwarzlose were concerned, Carey's suggestions for a cultural history of journalism were welcomed. The only problems which they saw were ones of "approach." That is, it was agreed that the field of inquiry should be widened to include the cultural dimensions of journalistic activity, but the questions of historical method and philo-

sophical perspective remained relatively untouched and unsettled.[17] Carey's call for a paradigmatic reformulation fell on many deaf ears.

After Carey's paper and the work it generated, only two major essays appeared in the journals which dealt with the philosophical foundations of journalism history. The first was Garth S. Jowett's "Communications in History: An Initial Theoretical Approach."[18] Borrowing from the insights of Harold A. Innis and Carey, Jowett attempted to outline a way of approaching the role of "communication systems" in the process of historical and social change. The second article was Joseph P. McKern's "The Limits of Progressive History."[19] Unlike previous discussions of the dominant perspectives in journalism historiography, McKerns attempted to detail the "paradigm crisis" confronting the field and to show why the study of journalism history had become stagnant. He tried to argue that the deep-seated problems stemming from the dominant Progressive interpretation could not be resolved within the scope of that paradigm. McKerns concluded that a variety of new approaches were needed because "journalism history is a mosaic, and it is imperative that journalism historians begin to provide the additional pieces."[20]

From this brief review of the few articles which offer critical reflections on journalism historiography, themselves part of a mosaic of their own, a number of general comments can be made. First, only a handful of journalism historians have given serious consideration to the origins of the problems in their own field. And only a small percentage of these historians have sought out the sources of the troubles afflicting journalism historiography. Secondly, most of those who have pursued the origins of the problems in historiographical research have been content

to cease their investigations with the identification and isolation of symptoms, and have failed to penetrate to the heart of the philosophical and methodological assumptions from which the difficulties have spread. And thirdly, with the exception of Carey and perhaps Jowett and Heuterman, journalism historians have not utilized or developed viable alternative perspectives. In sum, historical research in journalism has suffered from the absence of a vital and ongoing reexamination of its crucial philosophical and methodological moorings.

Yet serious historiographical reflection is precisely what is needed if our "shabby little orphan" is to survive and, just maybe, grow to maturity. The task of discovering new directions for journalism historiography is one which will involve more than a synthesis of conflicting presuppositions or an attempt to force old data into new theoretical molds. The task before journalism historians will require that no theoretical stones be left unturned and that each assumption be uprooted and critically scrutinized. Toward that end, there are at least three problem areas which should receive serious <u>ongoing</u> reflection: (1) the problem of the journalism historian's field of investigation; (2) the problem of historical judgment; and (3) the problem of historical revision and paradigmatic reformulation.

What is the journalism historian's field of investigation? Certainly, if the history of journalism historiography is any indicator, newspapers, biographies of newsmen and print technology stand out as some of the most examined and analyzed subject areas. But the more usual response to this question is "past journalistic activity," "past cultural development," or simply "any past human activity related to the communication dimension of

reality." The temporal orientation in these responses is a crucial one, to be sure, but such an orientation is unable to establish the criterion by which certain historical factors are selected from the vast number of events in the "past." "What historians usually do in practice," according to C.T. McIntire, "is rely heavily on what other historians have already selected and then employ highly personal intuition for the rest."[21] Consequently, successive generations of journalism historians have been inheriting a field whose dimensions and resources have remained largely uncharted and unexplored. Like the medieval Scholastics, many journalism historians have been content to follow the "received way" of formulating questions, directing research and interpreting their results. Such a hardening of the categories has been stifling.

Yet the reformation of journalism historiography can occur only when historians have wrestled with the idea of hisotrical time, the historical process and the role human beings as communicators have in that process. The delineation of the bounds of the field of investigation and the definition of categorical distinctions such as journalism, communications, society, history, culture, and so on, is absolutely crucial if journalism historians are going to come to an understanding of their own place in the academic enterprise. It may well be that the reason why the Progressive tradition has been exhausted is that its categories were too narrowly defined and too limited in their scope. The standard journalism histories of Bleyer, Lee, Payne, Jones and Mott were, by-and-large, chronological treatments of newspaper establishments and biographies of publishers and editors. Emery and Smith at least sought to compare social, political and economic developments with the developments in the newspaper

industry. But by treating journalism as an isolated phenomenon (with contextual matters merely tacked on as though they were essentially irrelevant), these histories have contributed little to hisotrical understanding. Yet journalism historians could begin knocking at the door of understanding's house by treating the journalistic enterprise as one among many of man's diverse communicative activities and looking at journalism history as it is interwoven into the complex fabric of human life. In any case, the field of investigation must be reconsidered.

A second important problem to be faced as a prerequisite to the reformation of journalism historiography is that of historical judgment. The issue confronting journalism historians is "not whether or not to make judgments, but what judgments to make and what norms to use in making them."[22] In every historical work, certain historical events are selected and singled out from a vast array of past events. What journalism historians have failed to come to grips with is the relationship between those events, the presuppositions they bring to the study of those events, and the norms they utilize in the selective process. Progressive journalism historians have selected events, happenings and ideas from past journalistic life for inclusion in their histories on the basis of their contribution to the steady development of (or their detraction from) democracy, freedom and progress. Criticism especially from New Left circles has shaken the foundations of this kind of historical judgment and has helped to identify more clearly some of the underlying presuppositions of Progressivism. But much more critical inquiry into the nature and norms of historical judgment is needed if journalism historiography is to achieve any level of philosophical or methodological sophistication. A reexamination of the problem of historical judgment is

a necessary prerequisite therefore to the discovery of new paths toward an historical understanding of journalism.

And finally, journalism historians need to take on the task of a sweeping historical revision. The works of Progressive historians have had an important place in journalism historiography and rightly so. Yet, as with any historical perspective, their view of American and world history controlling their historical judgment, and the reliability, accuracy and significance of their interpretations are open to challenge. Consequently, the categories and frameworks within which the history of journalism has been viewed must be turned upside-down and inside-out. Journalism historians, today as never before, must reexamine the history of journalism historiography itself from its deepest roots up. New vistas and new directions are inevitable when journalism historians begin to rethink why and how their field developed the way it did, and to see the dimensions and directions it came to manifest. From a thorough-going revision and a critical self-reflection, journalism historians may discover new insights and new perspectives for dealing with the problems which have plagued the field for the last twenty-five years.[23]

Such historiographical reflection is urgently needed and potentially rewarding insofar as it will provide a measure of self-consciousness, self-understanding and insight into the philosophical and methodological issues at stake, and thus deepen our historical understanding of journalism as a human communicative activity. For if the task of journalism historiography is, at least minimally, to make functional within the practice of writing and teaching history various communications insights into the processes of history, the nature of the social order and the structure of creation, then such historiographical reflection is not too much to demand of

practicing journalism historians. It may be a slow and theoretically difficult task, but it is the price which must be paid if there are to be some new directions in journalism historiography.

FOOTNOTES

[1]For a more extended discussion of the dominance of the progressive tradition see Joseph P. McKerns' "The Limits of Progressive Journalism History," Journalism History, 4(Autumn 1978), 88-92, and James W. Carey's "The Problem of Journalism History," Journalism History, 1(Spring 1974), 3-4. The discussion and criticism of the work that has been done within the progressive tradition that follows in this paper are not intended to abolish the importance or significance of that work, but rather to challenge journalism historians to look beyond that perspective.

[2]Since 1950 there have been only about thirty-five essays published in major communications and journalism journals. Almost two-thirds of those articles have appeared in this decade.

[3]Theodore Peterson, "On Teaching History," Coranto, 1(1950?), 2.

[4]Allan Nevins, "American Journalism and Its Historical Treatment," Journalism Quarterly, 36(1959), 413.

[5]In the November 1951 issue of Coranto (No. 4), a series was initiated which presented papers on the history of journalism given at the AEJ Convention in Urbana, August 27-29, of which Edwin Emery's "Correlation of Journalism History with Social, Political and Economic Trends in America" was the first.

[6]John D. Stevens and Donald L. Shaw, "Research Needs in Communications History: A Survey of Teachers," Journalism Quarterly, 45(1968), 549.

[7]Donald E. Oehlerts, "The Influence of Interpretations of American History on the History of the Press," Paper presented to the AEJ, June 1969, p. 2.

[8]Oehlerts, p. 5.

[9]Ronald T. Farrar, "Mass Communications History: A Myriad of Approaches," in Mass Media and the National Experience, edited by R. T. Farrar and J. D. Stevens (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 1-13.

[10]Ibid., p. 10.

[11]Ronald T. Farrar, "Journalism History must not be dehumanized," Journalism Educator, 27(April 1972), 5.

[12]Ibid., p. 3. An article which preceded Farrar's was Joseph L. Morrison's "On 'Irrelevant' History," Journalism Quarterly, 47(1970), 817-818. This represented another complaint against the state of journalism history and its teaching, and urged the AEJ to take steps to improve its condition.

[13]Hanno Hardt, "Communication and History: The Dimensions of Man's Reality," in Approaches to Human Communication, edited by R. Budd and B. Ruben (New York: Spartan Books, 1972), pp. 145-155.

[14]James W. Carey, "What's Wrong with Teaching and Research in Journalism History," Paper presented to the AEJ, June 1973, p. 3.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Garth Jowett, "Toward a History of Communication," Journalism History, 2(Summer 1975), 34-37; John Erickson, "One Approach to the Cultural History of Reporting," Journalism History, 2(Summer 1975), 40-43; Thomas Heuterman, "An Approach to Mass Communication History through American Studies," Clio, (Spring 1974), 2-4; Marion Marzolf, "Operationalizing Carey--An Approach to the Cultural History of Journalism," Journalism History, 2(Summer 1975), 42-43; Richard Schwarzlose, "First Things First: A Proposal," Journalism History, 2(Summer 1975), 38-39, 63; Donald L. Shaw, "Studying Newspapers as Cultural Reflectors: A Challenge for Communication Science Historians," Clio, (Spring 1974), 5-6; and David Weaver, "Frank Luther Mott and the Future of Journalism History," Journalism History, 2(Summer 1975), 44-47.

[17]Marzolf, p. 42; Schwarzlose, p. 63.

[18]Garth S. Jowett, "Communications in History: An Initial Theoretical Approach," The Canadian Journal of Information Science, 1(May 1976), 5-13.

[19]Joseph P. McKerns, "The Limits of Progressive Journalism History," pp. 88-92.

[20]Ibid., p. 92.

[21]C. T. McIntire, "The Ongoing Task of Christian Historiography," in A Christian View of History?, edited by G. Marsden and F. Roberts (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 67.

[22]Ibid., p. 72.

[23]An excellent example of one kind of rethinking and critical reflection on the problems of the field of investigation and historical judgment is Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's "The Advent of Printing in Current Historical Literature: Notes and Comments on an Elusive Transformation," American Historical Review, 75(February 1970), 727-743.

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